DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 257 EA 015 804

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TITLE Differences between Alternative and Conventional Schools in Meeting Students' Needs.
PUB DATE 11 Apr 83
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 11-15, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Educational Environment; *Nontraditional Education; *School Effectiveness; School Security; School Surveys; Secondary Education; Self Actualization; Self Concept; Social Environment; *Student Needs; *Student Reaction; Student School Relationship; Student Teacher Relationship; *Teacher Response; *Traditional Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Statements About Schools Inventory

ABSTRACT

This study employed the authors' previously developed Statements about Schools Inventory (SAS) to assess how well 14 alternative and 11 conventional high schools were meeting the needs of their students. Pairs of alternative and conventional schools studied were located in 11 communities in 10 states. Results of both student and teacher responses indicated that alternative schools were clearly superior in meeting students' needs in three of four areas: social, esteem, and self-actualization. Only security was rated higher for conventional schools, and the differences in this area were not statistically significant. Alternative school students held significantly higher expectations of their schools, but also described significantly higher levels of satisfaction than did conventional school students. Four tables and four graphs display considerable overlap between students' and teachers' scores within each of the two types of schools as well as a high degree of homogeneity within each of the four respondent groups. The authors conclude by indicating that while such factors as free choice and smaller school size probably contribute to the generally superior climate of alternative schools, the results of their study suggest that the concept itself deserves more serious attention than it has thus far received. (JBM)

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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ALTERNATIVE AND CONVENTIONAL SCHOOLS IN MEETING STUDENTS' NEEDS

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A Paper presented at the Annual Meeting
of the
American Educational Research Association

Montreal

April 11, 1983

Printed in the U.S.A.

EA 015 804

Abstract

The study compared how students and teachers in 14 alternative and 11 conventional schools in 10 states viewed their schools' success in meeting student needs. Through their responses to the STATEMENTS ABOUT SCHOOLS INVENTORY, both groups described how their actual schools and their ideal schools met students' security, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs. Regression analysis of these scores also permitted comparisons of both groups' levels of satisfaction with their schools' needs climates. With the exception of security needs, alternative school students and teachers both described needs climates significantly superior to those described by their conventional school counterparts.

Alternative schools presumably exist within the public sector as a test of the premise that it is possible to offer contrasting and equally legitimate learning climates within a given school system. The concept of "public schools of choice," now little more than ten years old, was supported through its early development by much rhetoric but little hard evidence that learning settings dramatically different from the status quo could be sustained within a socio-political system that has demonstrated a remarkable ability to resist change (e.g., see Sarason, 1982). Over the past few years, considerable evidence has indicated that alternative schools possess substantial potency as a change mechanism. We have recently summarized this body of information (Gregory and Smith, 1982), concluding that many of these schools constitute learning settings that do differ in important ways from their sister coventional schools.

Our earlier work attempted to more clearly delineate some of these differences, particularly in the values imbedded in these schools (Smith, McCollum, and Barclay, 1975) and the degree to which they meet students' needs (Smith, Gregory, and Pugh, 1981b). These studies yielded interesting results but fell short of the sort of direct comparison of matching pairs of schools from the same community that could support firm conclusions about how much alternatives differ from their conventional counterparts. Can two high schools in the same socio-political milieu, governed by the same budgetary contraints and policies, and working under the same administrative oversight, have significantly different climates? Can such differences be found not in just one, but in several communities in various regions of the country? The study reported here is an attempt to answer such questions.

This study (footnote 1), like our earlier work, employed our STATEMENTS ABOUT SCHOOLS INVENTORY (SAS), the development of which was reported at the 1981 AERA Meeting (Smith, Gregory, and Pugh, (1981a). The SAS contains four scales. The SECURITY scale focuses on students' needs for a stable, orderly, controlled environment that fosters a sense of well-being. The SOCIAL scale focuses on students' needs for friendship with both peers and adults in the high school setting. The ESTEEM scale focuses on students' needs to feel capable, worthwhile, and important. The SELF-ACTUALIZATION scale focuses on students' needs to reach their full potential as human beings.

In this study, both students and teachers completed the SAS, which involves sorting two identical sets of 40 statements into five Likert-like categories (from almost always fits my school to almost never fits my school). One sort reflects respondents' perceptions of how their school actually meets a students' needs. The second set of statements is sorted to reflect an individual's ideal school, one that the respondent would most like to attend or to teach in. Representative items for each of the four scales are:

SECURITY Scale
This school is well organized.
Teachers enforce the rules here.

SOCIAL Scale
The teachers here are enthusiastic.
Helping each other is encouraged here.

ESTEEM Scale
Each student feels worthwhile here.
Students are treated as mature persons.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION Scale
This school believes students can become better people.
Students are encouraged to be creative.

Both students and teachers assign statements to categories on the basis of how well each fits their actual or ideal school.

Groups of both alternative (N=35) and conventional school teachers (N=51) acted as "expert panels" during the item development stage of the SAS's development. Estimates of reliability (Cronbach alphas) of individual scales of the SAS ranged from .88 to .98 for students and .80 to .97 for teachers. Coefficients of concurrent validity with scales of the QUALITY OF SCHOOL LIFE QUESTIONNAIRE (QSL) (Epstein and McPartland, 1976) ranged from .63 to .95 for the top three scales of the SAS. (The QSL has no counterpart for the SAS's SECURITY scale.) The SAS was field-tested in six conventional and seven alternative high schools in a four-state area. Because of the nature of the results we will be reporting, we need to stress that we are confident of the validity of the SAS in both alternative and conventional settings.

The current study used the SAS to assess the degree to which a group of 14 alternative and a group of 11 conventional high schools were meeting the needs of their students as judged by both their students and teachers (footnote 2). We collected data in pairs of alternative and conventional schools in the same community. Many and sometimes all, of the students in each alternative would have attended the conventional high school had they not opted instead to attend the alternative school.

The design of any study comparing alternatives suffers from the contaminant of voluntary selection of a "treatment." If we are to study this very interesting facet of schooling, we must do our best to account for, and ultimately live with, this limitation. The obvious course of using an alternative's waiting list (students who are still attending the conventional school) as a comparison group struck us as unworkable. To depict a conventional school by the perceptions of what may be its most dissatisfied clientele is patently spurious. We chose, instead,

to acknowledge that free choice and the commitment it suggests are important climate factors. We are interested in describing and comparing climates--whatever the forces that shape them--rather than in attributing causality. School climate is an extremely complex phenomenon affected by many factors. A prudent inspection of the consistently large differences in climate we report here has led us to presume that we are measuring a great deal more than the simple effects of voluntary selection.

Subjects

The participating schools were located in 11 communities in 10 states: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin. The alternative schools enrolled from 35 to 450 students. Only four alternative schools enrolled more than 150 students, while five enrolled 70 students or less. All of the conventional schools, with enrollments between 915 and 3,617 students, were larger than any of the alternative schools (footnote 3). Controlling the effects of school size is a second problem of alternative schools research. Size obviously affects school climate. Comparing alternatives to small (probably rural) conventional schools would seem a way out of the dilemma; it is not. Our early work on the SAS suggested that these schools have even higher levels of control than the conventional schools we studied here. Also results from a few large alternatives (N>450) we have studied bear considerable resemblance to the scores yielded by small ones, leading us to conclude that the values by which these schools function are far more potent than the number of students they contain.

The racial/ethnic compositions of the schools varied considerably from community to community. Since schools were linked in pairs within individual communities, we exercised some control over these variables. Whites were the predominant group in the vast majority of both the conventional and alternative schools, representing from 78 to 100 percent of the students enrolled. We did have two conventional schools, however, with high proportions (from 66 to 74 percent) of minorities (Blacks and Hispanics) and one in which the proportion of minorities reached 40 percent (30 percent Black and 10 percent Oriental).

The minority representation in the alternative schools generally paralleled that of their conventional counterparts. The one exception appeared to be a situation in which the alternative was one element of desegregation plan. The percentage of Whites in the alternative was nearly the reverse of the conventional high school which shared the same campus. In other instances, however, as we have already said, the compositions of schools in the same community were quite similar.

Results

Four sets of scores were collected: students' judgments of

their actual and ideal schools and teachers' judgments of their actual and ideal schools. The data were then converted to standard scores (mean = 50; standard deviation = 10) for each scale. School means were then calculated for alternative school students (N = 877), alternative school teachers (N = 144), conventional school students (N = 1,414), and conventional school teachers (N = 662). All comparisons used the school as the unit of analysis.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarize the results of analyses of variance comparing these four sets of scores. The central finding of this study is that the alternative schools were clearly superior to the conventional schools in meeting students' higher level (SOCIAL, ESTEEM, and SELF-ACTUALIZATION) needs. Both students' and teachers' judgments of their schools support this generalization. For actual school scores, the SECURITY scale is the only exception in these results. Although conventional schools show slightly higher scores, as judged both by students and teachers, the differences here are not statistically significant ($p>.05$). In other words, the stereotypical view of alternatives as chaotic places for students and teachers to work, finds no support in our results.

As a general rule, alternative school students and teachers also held significantly higher expectations ("ideal" scores) of what school can do to meet students' needs (see Table 2). To the extent that teachers' expectations govern their behavior with students (the Pygmalion effect) the significantly higher ideals of alternative school teachers should push them toward higher levels of attainment in meeting student needs. This supposition is supported by their "actual" scores.

A final set of scores which we term "degree of satisfaction" scores was derived through regression analysis (footnote 4). Basically, these scores reflect the degree of agreement between actual and ideal scores. Where agreement is high, we assume a high degree of satisfaction. Students in alternative schools described significantly higher levels of satisfaction with how their schools were meeting their needs than did their counterparts in conventional schools (see Table 3). There were, however, no significant differences in the satisfaction levels of teachers across the two types of schools.

The concept of school satisfaction is also represented graphically in the scatter-plot graphs presented in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4, each displaying the results for one of the SAS scales. Each data point represents the intersection of the mean actual and ideal scores for all the teachers or students in an individual school. If these scores are in agreement (i.e., the respondents are well-satisfied) their data point will fall in or near the diagonal path indicated on each figure. Note that using this convention enables a school to have a very low actual score on a scale and still be considered to be satisfied if it produced an equally low ideal score. "Ideal" may be an inaccurate label

for such scores. Rather, one might more fairly term them expectation scores. Students (and teachers) in some schools may be telling us what they think schools can do to meet students' needs rather than what schools should do.

Lastly, in an attempt to display the relative homogeneity of a group of scores and the degree of overlap between groups, we have superimposed rectangles over approximately 80 percent of the scores for each respondent group. Our intent is that these rectangles function as a visual generalization of the scores for each group, thus aiding interpretation of the data.

Discussion

Five conclusions are evident to us as we consider these results. First, these alternative schools, which we consider a fairly representative sample, are superior to their sister conventional schools in meeting their students' higher level (SOCIAL, ESTEEM, and SELF-ACTUALIZATION) needs. Both the students and the teachers in these schools tell us this. The differences are so great that there is essentially no overlap in the score ranges for students or teachers in the two types of schools on these three scales. The diversity of our sample dramatizes these differences. We collected data in some remarkably good and some fairly ordinary schools of both types. That several highly-reputed conventional schools could score so much lower than some very average, perhaps even weak alternatives is a result we had also obtained in our earlier study (Smith, Gregory, and Pugh, 1981b) yet it is one that continues to puzzle us. To us, it suggests that something powerful and fundamentally systemic is occuring on a regular basis in alternative schools, regardless of the salient characteristics of their clientele or their socio-political settings.

One wonders if a price must be paid to achieve these results in alternatives. Are they attained, for example, by coddling students and not requiring them to apply themselves? Evidence comparing achievement in conventional and alternative schools is scant and what exists offers mixed results. A broad base of achievement data was available for two sister schools in our sample. In the alternative school, students demonstrated generally superior achievement to students in the conventional school in two testings, conducted two years apart, by their state's department of education. Minimally, these data indicate that it is possible for a school to both provide a highly supportive climate for and encourage high achievement among its students.

Second, there are no appreciable differences in these two types of schools in responding to SECURITY needs. That these schools can be so different on the other three scales and yet so similar on the SECURITY scale intrigues us. Certainly, compulsory attendance laws, professional liability issues, and school board policies contribute to this sameness. But, at a

more fundamental level, all of these schools may be responding to strong, tacit, social expectations. This may be one significant way in which the so-called hidden curriculum wields its influence. As one alternative school teacher we talked to put it, "School is school. If you're going to keep school, you're going to do certain things or be put out of business." However, we do not want to imply that the forms of control are the same in both settings. They are not. But the need for control is seen as legitimate by students and teachers in both settings.

Third, results of the regression analyses indicate that alternative school students are significantly more satisfied with the climates of their schools than are their conventional school counterparts. Despite the fact that they also hold significantly higher ideals for what schools should do for students, their descriptions of their actual schools more closely match these ideals. This relationship is graphically evident in Figures 2, 3, and 4 which show the alternatives being considerably closer to the "satisfaction diagonal". The degree to which alternative school students (and teachers, for that matter) hold these higher ideals and actively seek a setting that matches them or develop them after experiencing an alternative setting is an interesting question, but one unanswerable in this study.

Fourth, the four graphs display a considerable amount of overlap between students' and teachers' scores within a type of school, particularly in regard to their ideals. Conventional school students agree far more with their teachers about how a school ought to meet students' needs than they do with their alternative school counterparts. Similarly, alternative school students are in higher agreement on ideals with their teachers than they are with conventional school students. This teacher-student solidarity on ideals may be one factor that has made it so difficult to change schools. Considerable agreement also exists between students' and teachers' perceptions of their "actual" settings within each school type.

Fifth, Figures 2, 3, and 4 indicate a high degree of homogeneity within each of the four respondent groups. Some of the rectangles encompassing approximately 80 percent of a given group are quite compact. Only in Figure 1, representing the distribution of SECURITY Scale scores, and then only among alternatives, does one find considerable disagreement within a respondent group about how school is or how it ought to be. Students or teachers in two conventional or two alternative schools 2000 miles apart, with different ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic compositions, perhaps even markedly different programs, agree much more about the nature of school climate than they do with their respective sister school cohorts of the same ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic composition. These results again suggest that fundamental systemic differences may exist between these two school types that are sufficiently powerful to transcend a number of variables known to be influential in most circumstances.

Again, we are dealing with a very complex issue when we examine the climates of schools. Certainly, the elements of free choice and school size represent additional dimensions to that complexity. The alternative schools we examined varied widely on the choice dimension. In some, students learned of the alternative's existence only after they had experienced academic or behavior problems in the conventional school. Yet, these alternatives produced climate scores similar to alternative schools that are widely publicized in their communities and actively recruit students. Likewise, the SAS does not yield markedly different climate scores in large (N>450) and small alternatives (N<80).

Nevertheless, we do think size has considerable impact on the climate of a school. We sense, for example, important differences in the "feel" of large and small alternatives. But the teachers and students in these schools apparently perceive them as meeting students' needs (the comparatively narrow dimension of climate we have examined) in very similar ways. Minimally, we think the generally favorable results we and several other researchers have obtained in studying alterantives suggest that this educational concept merits more serious attention from school boards, community groups, teachers' organizations, and certainly, researchers than it has received thus far.

Table 1

Analyses of Variance of Students' and Teachers' Views of Their "Actual" Schools

Students	Alt. $\bar{X}$ (N=14)	Conv. $\bar{X}$ (N=11)	F	p
Security Scale	48.6	51.8	<1	ns
Social Scale	57.8	40.0	94.17	.001
Esteem Scale	57.5	40.5	66.68	.001
Self-Actual. Scale	57.5	40.4	70.29	.001
Teachers				
Security Scale	46.9	53.9	3.32	ns
Social Scale	57.9	39.9	116.75	.001
Esteem Scale	57.9	40.0	54.74	.001
Self-Actual. Scale	57.3	40.7	56.38	.001

Table 2

Analyses of Variance of Students' and Teachers' Conceptions of Their "Ideal" Schools

Students	Alt. $\bar{X}$ (N=14)	Conv. $\bar{X}$ (N=11)	F	p
Security Scale	45.5	55.7	8.31	.01
Social Scale	56.9	41.3	38.57	.001
Esteem Scale	55.7	42.7	17.80	.001
Self-Actual. Scale	55.9	42.5	19.86	.001
Teachers				
Security Scale	43.3	58.5	34.15	.001
Social Scale	57.5	40.5	65.58	.001
Esteem Scale	57.1	41.0	45.23	.001
Self-Actual. Scale	56.8	41.3	37.03	.001

Table 3

Analyses of Variance of Students' and Teachers' Levels of Satisfaction with Their Schools

Students	Alt. $\bar{X}$ * (N=14)	Conv. $\bar{X}$ * (N=11)	F	p
Security Scale	.31	- .40	<1	ns
Social Scale	1.25	-1.60	5.48	.05
Esteem Scale	2.12	-2.71	11.56	.01
Self-Actual. Scale	1.50	-1.91	9.76	.01
Teachers				
Security Scale	.61	- .78	<1	ns
Social Scale	.70	- .89	2.87	ns
Esteem Scale	.56	- .71	2.27	ns
Self-Actual. Scale	.72	- .91	3.15	ns

*Regression residuals were not converted to standard scores.

Figure 1

Comparisons of alternative and conventional school students' and teachers' perceptions of how well their actual and ideal schools' meet students' security needs

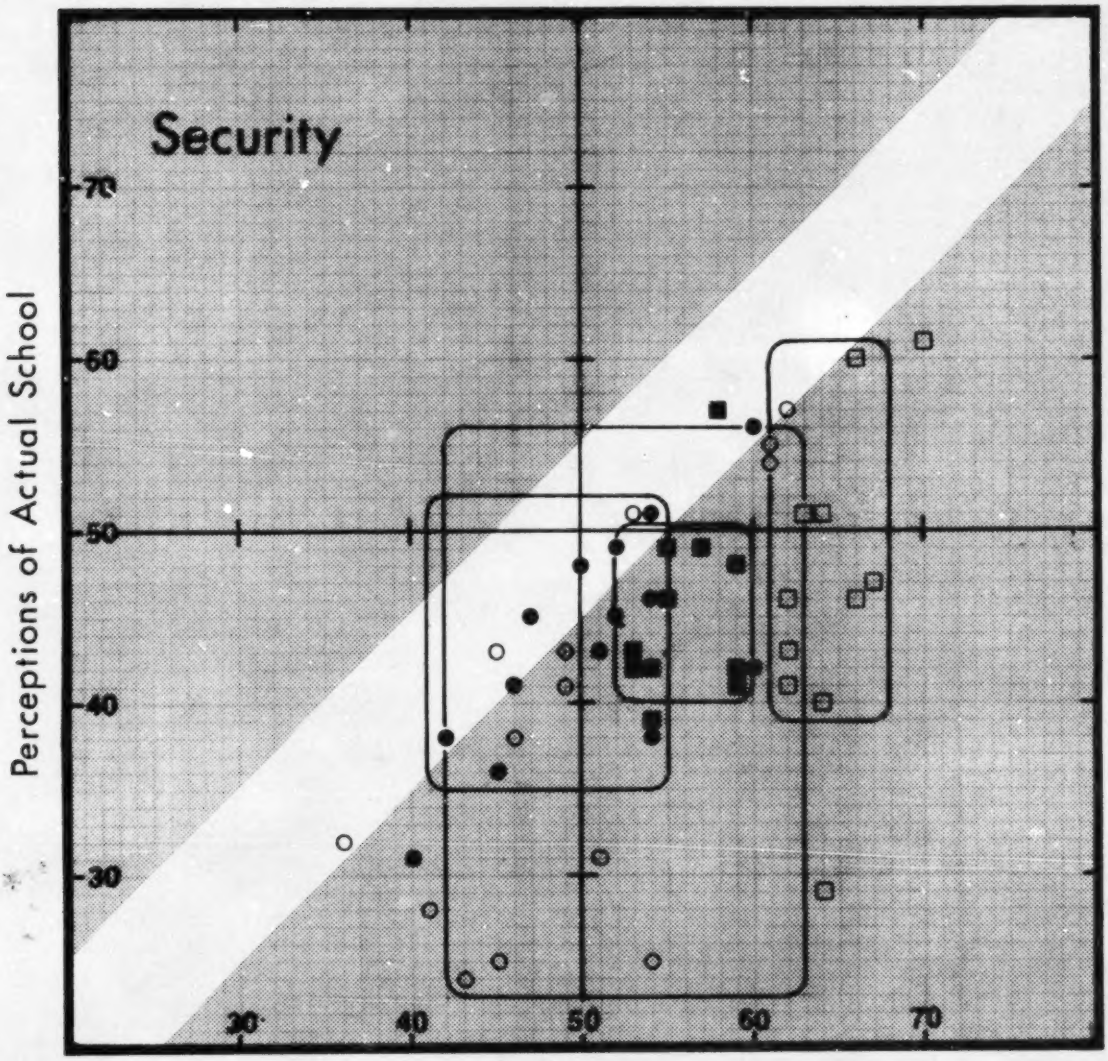


Figure 2

Comparisons of alternative and conventional school students' and teachers' perceptions of how well their actual and ideal schools' meet students' social needs

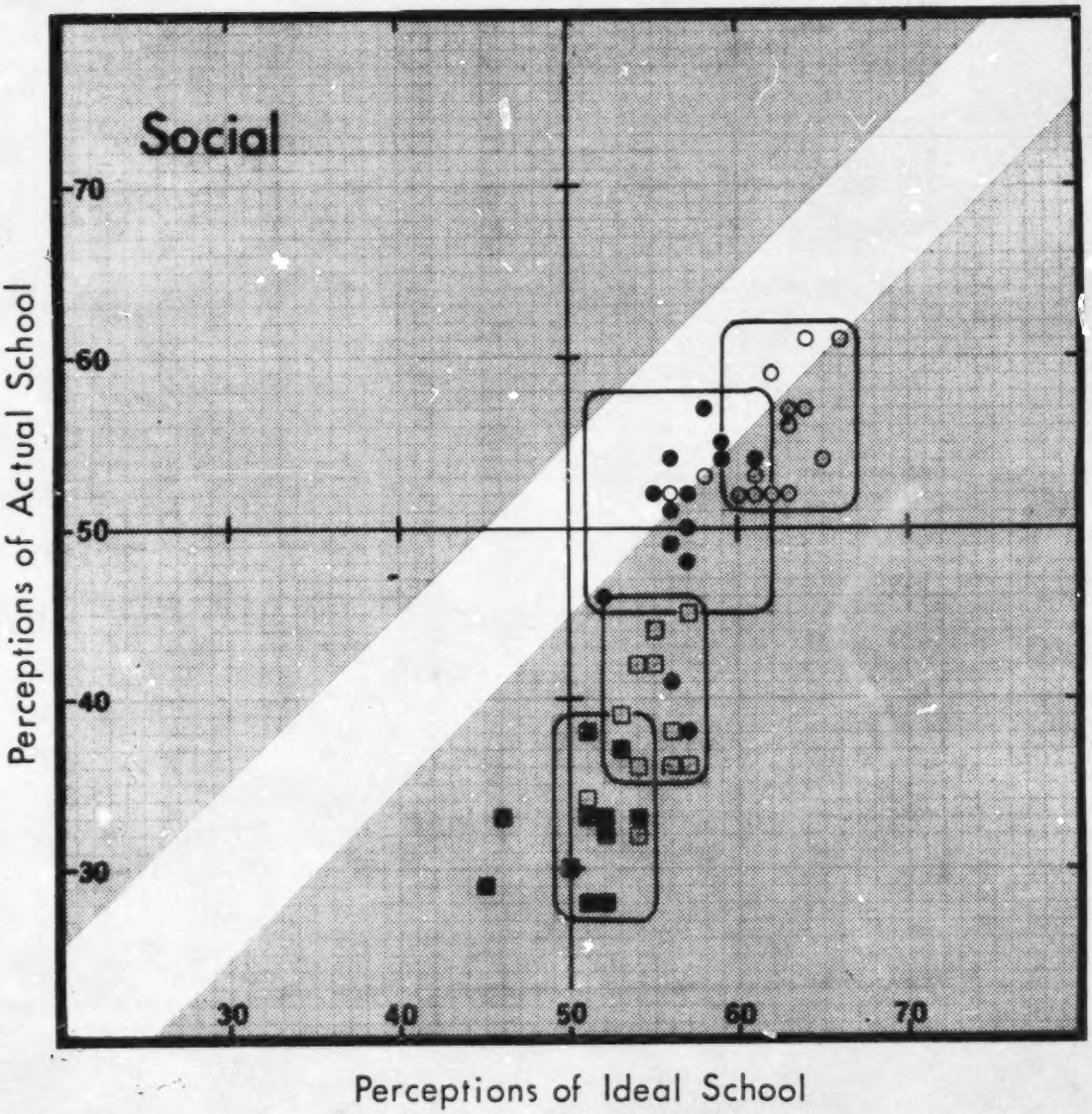


Figure 3

Comparisons of alternative and conventional school students' and teachers' perceptions of how well their actual and ideal schools' meet students' esteem needs

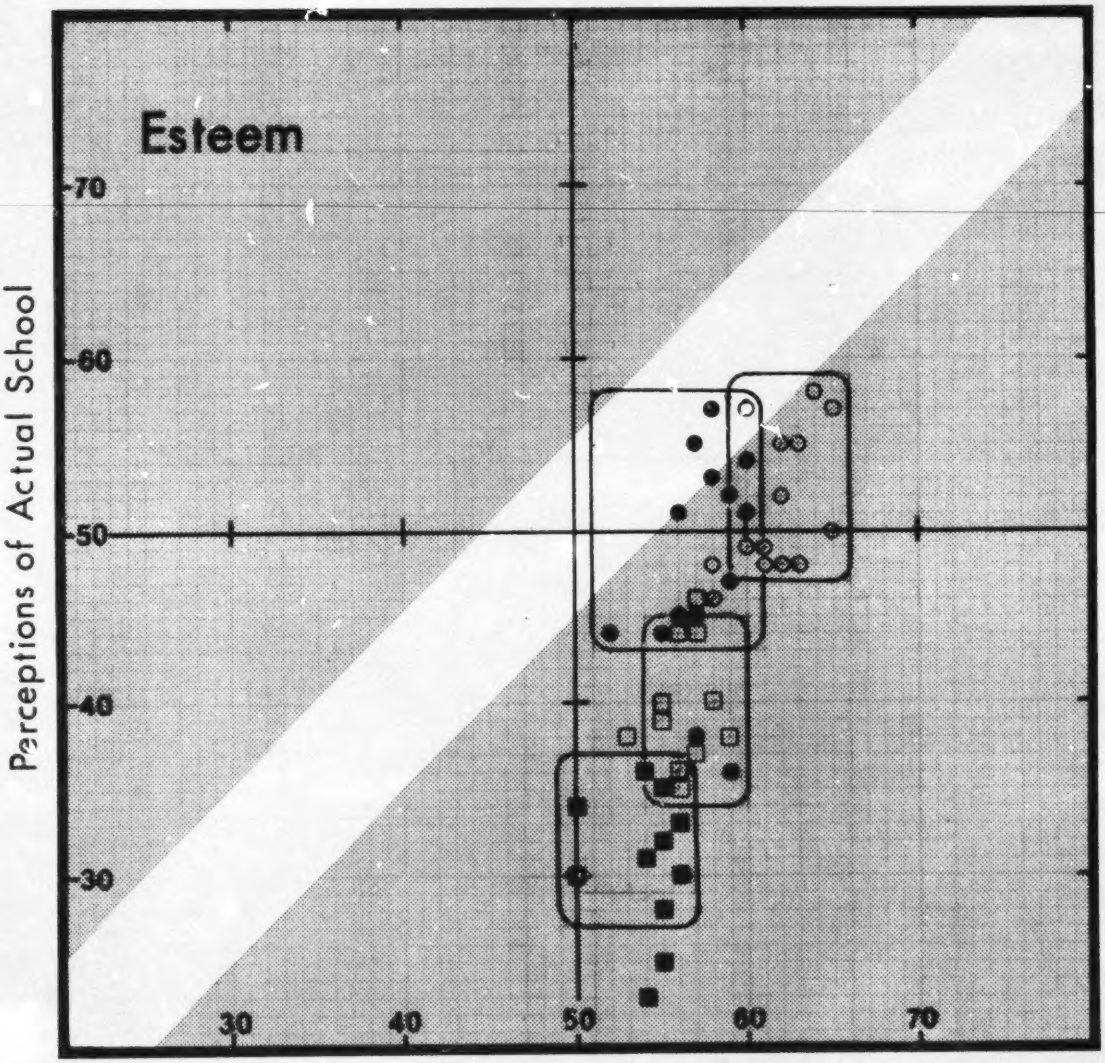
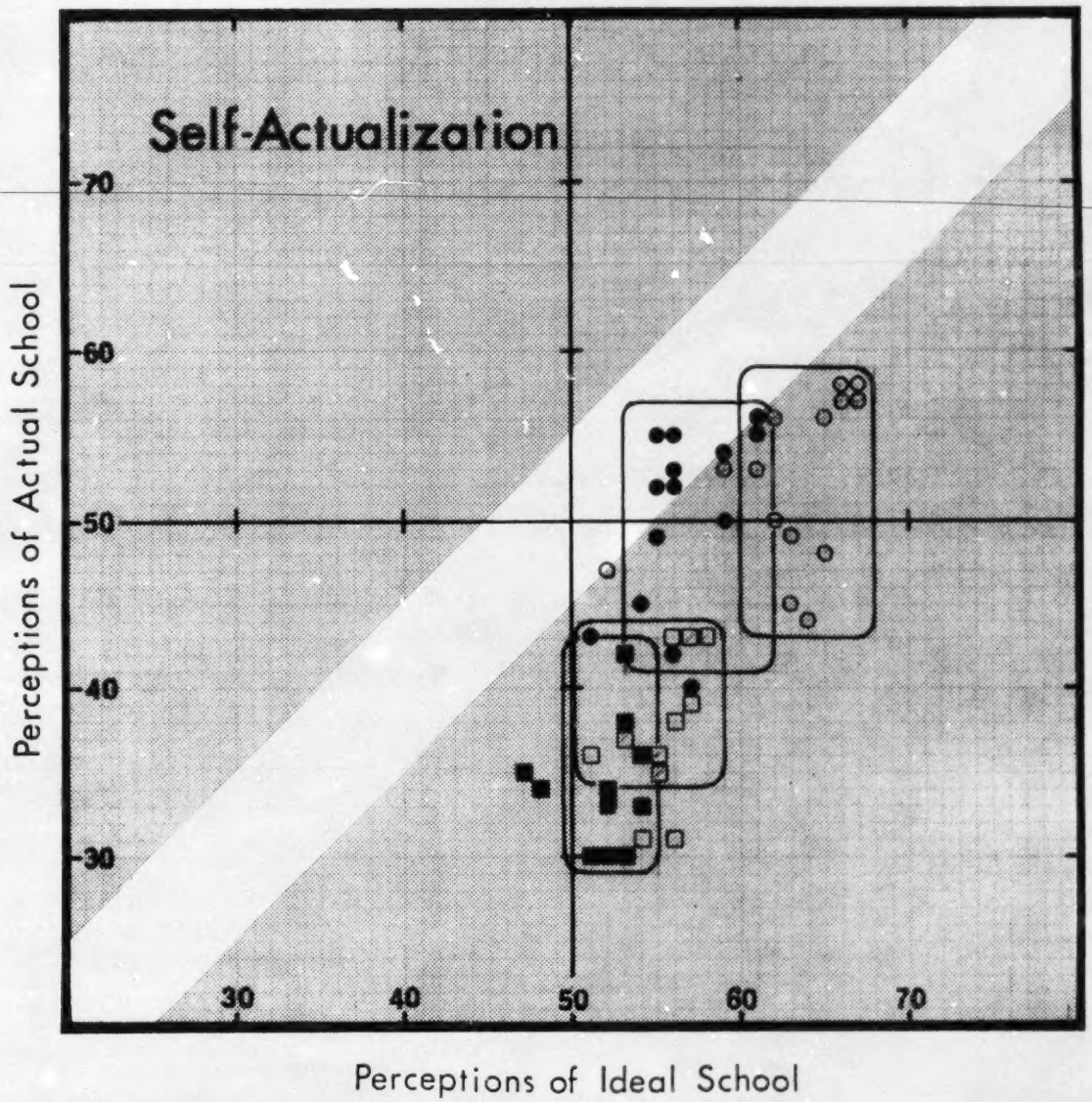


Figure 4

Comparisons of alternative and conventional school students' and teachers' perceptions of how well their actual and ideal schools' meet students' self-actualization needs



Footnotes

1. This research was supported, in part, by a grant from the Maris Proffitt and Mary Higgins Proffitt Endowment Fund, School of Education. Indiana University.

2. In two communities, more than one alternative school was paired w'th a sing.e conventional high school, hence the unequal N's.

3. N's collected in individual schools varied, but we typically collected data, in person, from a representative sample of about 130 students and all teachers in each conventional high school and large alternative. In smaller alternative schools, we tried to collect all students in attendance that day.

4. These scores were derived from a simple regression equation for students and a separate regression equation for teachers. Ideal school means served as the predictor variable and actual school means served as the criterion variable. Residuals were then calculated for both students and teachers in each school.

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